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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001522

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DEPARTMENT FOR D, SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA, S/CT; NSC FOR  
E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09-02-13

TAGS: PGOV PTER PINR PINS CE LTTE

SUBJECT: Tiger political chief Thamilmhelvam's steady  
eclipse of group's long-time spokesman

Refs: (A) SA/INS-Colombo class e-mail 08/29/03

- (B) Colombo 1504, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of  
Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: S.P. Thamilmhelvam, political chief of  
the Tamil Tigers, has taken an increasingly high profile  
role as chief Tiger spokesman on peace track issues. In  
the meantime, Anton Balasingham, the group's long-time  
spokesman and negotiator, has not been heard from in  
weeks. In explaining this situation, some say  
Balasingham is ill and is convalescing, or that  
Thamilmhelvam has been hand-picked by Tiger leader  
Prabhakaran to replace Balasingham for political  
reasons. If the experienced Balasingham remains out of  
the picture, it could represent a setback for the peace  
process, given Thamilmhelvam's acute lack of  
international experience and stature. END SUMMARY.

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Thamilmhelvam's Ascendance  
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2. (C) In the past several months, S.P. Thamilmhelvam,  
political chief of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam  
(LTTE), has taken an increasingly high profile role as  
chief Tiger spokesman on peace process issues. In doing  
so, Thamilmhelvam is steadily eclipsing the role  
traditionally held by Anton Balasingham, the LTTE's  
long-standing chief spokesman and negotiator. Signs of  
Thamilmhelvam's rapid ascendancy include:

-- In a late August "in house" meeting of LTTE officials  
and pro-LTTE Tamils in Paris, Thamilmhelvam led the LTTE  
team (see Ref B). Balasingham, who lives in London, did  
not attend. Thamilmhelvam's participation received  
significant local press coverage and he was also  
featured on the pro-LTTE website, "TamilNet."  
Thamilmhelvam is also slated to lead a LTTE team to  
Switzerland in early September to discuss federalism-  
related issues.

-- In late July - early August, Thamilmhelvam made a  
high profile trip to eastern Sri Lanka. In Batticaloa  
and Trincomalee Districts, Thamilmhelvam spoke at a  
number of large pro-LTTE rallies and met with the local  
Tiger leadership. The trip received significant press  
coverage (see Ref B), including on TamilNet.

-- TamilNet, and other pro-LTTE websites and  
publications, have taken to lavishly quoting  
Thamilmhelvam's comments on current events.

-- Thamilmhelvam is increasingly the "go to" LTTE  
official for the Norwegian government facilitation team  
and the Norwegian-run Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission  
(SLMM).

(Note: Additional bio information regarding  
Thamilmhelvam and Balasingham is available in Reftels.)

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Silence from Balasingham  
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3. (C) The flip side of Thamilmhelvam's high profile has  
been the silence from the London-based Balasingham.  
Since the advent of the peace process in December 2001  
until recently, Balasingham was the key LTTE official  
cited by the pro-LTTE press, and the LTTE official  
taking the lead in meetings with the Norwegian  
facilitators and GSL officials. That has all changed,  
however. As mentioned above, while Balasingham used to  
be quoted on TamilNet constantly, his last substantive  
statement was posted on June 25. After that time, it  
has all been Thamilmhelvam. Moreover, based on comments

from Tamil contacts, there are also no/no reports that Balasingham has been meeting in London with Tamil interlocutors regarding peace process issues. There are also no indications that he plans to visit Sri Lanka, as he has done on occasion during the course of the peace process, to consult with the LTTE leadership in the north. From what Mission understands, the Norwegian facilitators have also not met him in some time. We have also not heard of any contacts between Balasingham and Sri Lankan government officials in months. In essence, Balasingham seems to be completely out of the picture at this time.

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Is it Balasingham's Health?  
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14. (C) The LTTE, as is its secretive style regarding personnel matters (and just about anything else), has not issued any statements explaining Balasingham's absence from the scene -- or Thamilchelvam's ascendance. In discussing this issue, some contacts claim that Balasingham is seriously ill and no longer can do the job, or that he is storing up his strength for possible peace talks later this year. It has long been known that Balasingham has chronic illnesses; he has reportedly had a kidney transplant and is said to have diabetes. In arranging for Balasingham's participation at the six rounds of peace talks held from late 2002 through early 2003 in venues including Bangkok and Berlin, the Norwegian facilitators had to work hard to ensure that Balasingham had access to medical care at all times.

15. (C) Regarding Balasingham's current health status, Norwegian contacts have told us that they think that Balasingham is basically convalescing. In an August 29 meeting with poloff, Kjersti Tromsdahl, poloff at the Norwegian Embassy, noted that the GoN did not have much concrete information on the situation. That said, she commented that she thought that Balasingham's health was extremely poor, but was not deteriorating. Balasingham appeared to be pacing himself, preparing for possible talks with the Sri Lankan government later this year. The Norwegians had no indications that Balasingham's health might take him out of the picture completely, or that he had somehow run afoul of V. Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader, Tromsdahl related.

16. (C/NF) British government contacts have given us a mixed picture re Balasingham's health. In an August 29 conversation, Margaret Tongue, poloff at the British High Commission, told us that she had heard that Balasingham was ill and that his health was getting worse. Tongue indicated that HMG officials had not met with Balasingham in some time, although he lives in the London area. In the meantime in a report that somewhat contradicted Tongue's points, a British embassy contact provided an intel document to SA/INS deskoff on August 29 that said that Balasingham had recently made personal trips outside of the UK. The information that Balasingham was ambulatory tended to indicate that his health was not the reason for his recent low profile on peace track issues (see more re British views below).

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Is it Politics?  
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17. (C) Another perspective on the situation is that Thamilchelvam has been hand-picked by Tiger leader V. Prabhakaran to replace Balasingham for political reasons. Several Tamil contacts hold this view. Suresh Premachandran, a Tamil politician with long-standing connections with Tamil militant groups, for example, told us recently that he thought that Prabhakaran had decided to take a harder line regarding the peace process, and had taken steps to substitute a more pliant Thamilchelvam for the more independent-minded Balasingham. Premachandran added that he had heard that Prabhakaran and Balasingham had had a bit of a falling out over participation at the Tokyo donors conference. Balasingham had wanted the LTTE to go, but Prabhakaran had ordered the LTTE to boycott the June 2003 conference.

18. (C/NF) In an August 30 conversation with poloff, N. Raviraj, a MP for the Tamil National Alliance, said he also thought politics was the genesis of Balasingham's seeming eclipse. He said he had heard that Balasingham's position within the LTTE hierarchy was not a strong one at this time and Prabhakaran had decided to give more responsibility to Thamilchelvam. Neither Premachandran nor Raviraj thought that Balasingham's disappearance from the scene was necessarily permanent, however, with both thinking he could make a comeback if

Prabhakaran permitted it. (Note: The British document mentioned above also indicated that there was some dissonance in the LTTE between "pragmatic hard-liners" like Balasingham and "hard-liners" like Thamilvelvam. Prabhakaran was backing the hard-line camp, according to the document. The British report was not clear as to its sourcing.)

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) The LTTE is a notoriously opaque organization. Given how secretive it is, there is virtually no way to confirm reports that Prabhakaran may have replaced Balasingham in favor of Thamilchelvam. At the same time, accurate information about the precise state of Balasingham's health is not available. What can be said, however, is that if Balasingham remains out of the picture for whatever reason, it could represent a setback for the peace process. Balasingham has years of international experience and understands the art of negotiation. Thamilchelvam, a former LTTE military official, lacks such experience. Unlike Prabhakaran, he also lacks stature, as he seems more of a creature of Prabhakaran's than an influential actor within LTTE circles in his own right. All that said, given Prabhakaran's absolutely central importance in the organization, LTTE decision-making regarding peace track issues will ultimately be decided by what policies Prabhakaran alone chooses to pursue, and not by either Balasingham or Thamilchelvam. Experience is important, however, and a prolonged absence by Balasingham could potentially lead to problems around the edges of the peace process down the road. END COMMENT.

10. (U) Minimize considered.

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